

Lesley's story: part 2

In our last issue, Lesley revealed how drinking sent her life on a downward spiral. In the second part of her story, she tells how she picked herself up; found a treatment programme to tackle her dependency and found life is worth living.

During the six months after her partner Steve died, Lesley became involved with a local voluntary sector treatment agency. The initial contact was made in the detox ward at the psychiatric hospital. The local agency arranged for Lesley to go to a residential treatment centre away from her home. Even though she was aware that she had an alcohol problem, Lesley looked upon her forthcoming time at the residential centre as a holiday. It would be nice to get away, as she could do with a break.

Lesley's drinking continued at the same level while she was waiting to start residential treatment. She had to sell some of her possessions, and sell or swap her prescribed valium to obtain alcohol. By this time, it wasn't taking her much to get drunk – she would drink approximately six cans of lager or cider a day. 'I couldn't take anymore. I was just passing out or blacking out.'

During 21 weeks in the residential centre, Lesley's life changed dramatically. After detoxing, she spent eight weeks in primary care, a treatment programme that aims to help patients face the reality of their addiction, change the behaviours associated with it, and provide the foundations for recovery. The programme is holistic in nature, incorporating one-to-one counselling, group work and medical support, along with audio and video presentations, lectures, stress management, relaxation sessions and aerobics. During primary care, clients work through the first five steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Members of the client community are also encouraged to help each other.

Lesley had originally intended to stay only eight weeks, head back home, and try to arrange for her son to come out of foster care. However, after about three or four weeks something changed inside her and she decided she wanted to enter secondary care. This programme, which lasts another 13 weeks in residence, is a stepping-stone between primary care and returning to the

wider community. It combines group therapy, one-to-one counselling and personal assignment work. Secondary care is a therapeutic community, which also involves residents taking part in the active running of the houses and household activities – shopping, cooking, budgeting and household management. Residents are also encouraged to become involved with voluntary work within the local community. 'Secondary gives the opportunity to live in the real world while still cocooned. You still have your fallback if anything goes wrong.'

When Lesley left the residential centre, her local treatment agency and social services continued to support her. She attended AA – 90 meetings in 90 days – which she found really scary. She also had some support from a family member. She had intended to receive aftercare from the local treatment agency, but felt more at ease periodically attending the residential centre for this form of support as she had more people there with whom she could identify. However, she engaged in the diversionary activities at the local agency (computer classes, cooking and gardening), which she found very helpful.

Three months after Lesley came home from the residential centre, James was visiting more often. As she began to stand on her own two feet more, she cut down on the time she was spending at the local treatment agency and at AA meetings. James eventually came home full-time and has remained there since. He had spent approximately three years (on and off) in care or with foster parents.

Looking back, Lesley feels that she needed residential rehabilitation, rather than being treated as an outpatient, despite her strong positive feelings towards the local treatment agency. 'Some of us need to be locked up, for want of a better expression... I didn't feel I had enough going for me... I was home and what the eye couldn't see... I'd be drinking at home and I'd be coming in here [local agency] and



'Some of us need to be locked up, for want of a better expression... I didn't feel I had enough going for me... I was home and what the eye couldn't see... I'd be drinking at home and I'd be coming in here [local agency] and lying through my teeth.'

lying through my teeth.'

Lesley believes that her main reason for remaining abstinent was for herself and her son. 'I couldn't put my son through what he's been through another time.' She now enjoys a 'brilliant' relationship with James – they are best friends. During her drinking days, Lesley's relationship with her sister deteriorated badly. Now, they have a positive and loving relationship that far exceeds anything they had before.

She started to work as a volunteer at the local treatment agency and eventually was appointed as a tenancy support worker. She no longer describes herself as lonely. 'I like to think I'm someone people get on with... no, I know I'm someone people like to get on with and like to be with these days... I feel worthwhile...'

Lesley has been sober for over four years. She has not had a compulsion to drink since she left residential treatment. But she knows that she mustn't become complacent because that could be dangerous.

Life without drink is 'brilliant', she says. 'You notice everything... Learning to live clean is good because there are lots of things you think you can't do, but you can. And it's brilliant looking out in the morning, the sun is shining, you know? The smile on my son's face.'

'Recovery is about learning to live properly, live as we're meant to live... something clicks and suddenly, "Yes, I am worth living. I am worth a decent life. I am a good person"'